

TELL ME WHO TO BE

a collection of bicultural stories

created and compiled by Nishi Patel

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As an Indian American who spent 10 years of my life in India, I always felt different than everyone. My journey with being bicultural was pretty confusing, because I used to think that being bicultural meant being 50 percent of one culture and 50 percent the other. But in reality biculturalism is more of a spectrum—where you land depends on how you were raised and your choices in life.

I wanted to create *Tell Me Who To Be* to help those who have the same feelings of not-belonging and make them realize that they aren't alone.

Through the combination of expressive typography, handwriting, and digital illustration, I wanted to create a personal experience for the reader. The zine is also supported by an Instagram account *@tellmewhotobe*, that introduces each story, and will promote other resources about biculturality.

Tell Me Who To Be aims to spark conversations about bicultural journeys between people with similar and different backgrounds, to support and celebrate each other.

—Nishi Patel

**Like all living systems,
cultures cannot remain static;
they evolve or decline.
They explore or expire.**

—Buzz Aldrin

Diana
Chau Hu

Where does your biculturality come from?

My parents are both from China, and then they moved to Peru. That's where I was born and raised. Then when I was 16 years old, I moved to the US.

Did you move straight to New York?

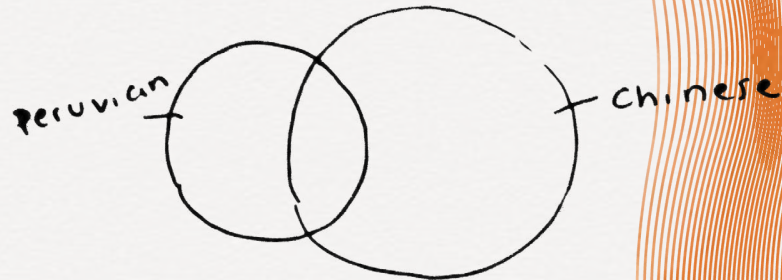
Yeah, and it's moving here that made me question my cultural identity. Growing up in Peru, I always felt more Asian but then after moving here I started thinking, maybe I'm not *that* Asian.

What does being bicultural mean to you?

Sometimes it's like feeling like not belonging anywhere, but also appreciating the different cultures and being open-minded about it. It introduces you to new things. It makes you more open, and gives you another perspective.

I have to agree, I think there is so much to learn from both cultures.

It feels very similar to my mom's experience, when she moved to Peru while her family was still in China. Plus, the US is so different from Peru. There's different ways of living and thinking and all of that really influences who a person is.



What was your upbringing like at home with both your Peruvian and Asian cultures?

At home my mom tried to keep the Asian traditions around with food and other things, and we also celebrated Christmas. We mostly worked during holidays though because my parents have a restaurant of their own, so that was basically our tradition. Which is why when I was in Peru with my mom I felt very Asian.

Then when I moved here without my parents it felt like I really didn't have that. I'm now living with my grandma and my brother, so that's when I realized that most of my Asian culture and identity came more from my parents and my upbringing.

How long were you in school in Peru?

Until the 11th grade, which was considered senior year. The academic year in Peru is from March to December, but the academic year in the US is from September to May. Basically, I was halfway through my senior year in Peru and then I moved here and had to start the 11th grade all over again.

That must've been hard for you, especially because you were so close to graduation.

It was, and there was also the language barrier that I had to work through.

I knew the basics of English and it is close enough to Spanish in some ways. So, sometimes I could understand words but I didn't understand whole sentences. I didn't really know how to talk to people at first.

So, there was definitely a culture shock—coming here and not knowing anything.

I actually understood very little of my mother tongue when I moved to India, now I'm pretty fluent. But every now and then I find myself asking my mom, "what does this word mean? I need help."

I do that with Chinese. At home we spoke a dialect of Cantonese that's from my parents' hometown, Taishanese. When I moved here, there were all these Chinese students who moved straight from China, but they only spoke either Mandarin or Cantonese. So even the Chinese that I knew wasn't like theirs. So I felt a little alienated from them.

culture shock

I also think food is literally such a big part of culture, and it's really hard to find culture specific food replicated anywhere else.

I know! It's all about the ingredients and how the dishes are made. I miss Peruvian food so much. It's been so long. At least I can get Asian foods here, because in Peru I wasn't exposed to a majority of Asian food. I also lived in a small city and we didn't have the Asian supermarkets like we have in New York City. I just miss the food so much.

How do you feel about your bicultural identity? How much do you relate to it?

I think at first, I was a little more insecure about if I was Hispanic enough or Asian enough. For instance, with Hispanic culture I have the upbringing, the culture, the language. Then with being Chinese I have the values and the traditions within my family. I feel that sometimes when I'm without my family I don't have as much of my Asian culture. Even with something as basic as going to a Chinese restaurant, I always have to go with my mom, I can't order anything without her. I feel like my parents and my family are an essential part of that identity.

Have you ever talked about how you feel about your identity with anyone?

I've talked about it with other friends that also struggle with the same experiences and I feel that it helped me connect more with them. It's hard finding people you can relate to. But with my friends I feel like everyone has a similar background or experiences, so it's all about finding those people that will click.

find the people
that click



Given that you were born and raised in Peru until 16, how many languages do you speak?

So I know Taishanese, Spanish and English. I can read and write in Spanish and English, but I can only speak Taishanese. But I feel like I'm mediocre with all of them. Sometimes if I don't know a word in English but I know it in Spanish, I'll mix both languages in a sentence. So it's like I can speak three languages, but not that very well.

I mix my languages all the time! At school in India we spoke a lot of Hinglish, which is a mix of Hindi and English. So you're definitely not alone with the mix and matching :)

If you could tell your younger self something in relation to your biculturality, what would it be?

Not being so insecure, and guilty for not being fully involved in one culture instead of the other, because for me, I just become uncomfortable saying like I'm both of them. Maybe I don't check all the boxes for each of them, but that's fine. I don't need to be everything.





**A bicultural upbringing is
a rich but imperfect thing**

—Jhumpa Lahiri



Anne G. S.

Where does your bicultural identity come from?

I look at it as being three different things coming together. One is that my father was born and raised in Lithuania and he went through the Second World War in concentration camps and then came to the United States in the 50s. Then my mother is considered a Mizrahi Jew, a Northern African Middle Eastern Jew. Her roots are in Iraq, but she was raised in Mumbai, India and then came to Canada where she met my father and then got married and came to the United States. But I also feel like the other thing that mixes in because it's almost on the same level of foreignness, is being American.

What does being bicultural mean to you?

I always felt really different. From my parents being immigrants and that oddball combination; being working class and also socially reticent. I grew up in a way that was different from other people in my neighborhood because my parents were right off the boat. But, I always felt like there was a kind of richness, because I felt that it was unusual and I valued it.

It was also because of the ways culture manifested at home. My mother cooked foods from both cultures, and I heard a smattering of Hindi and Arabic in the house as well as Yiddish from my father. I didn't really grow up like a typical American kid. My parents were older. They were very strict. My father had experiences that were very scary, so he tended to be very mistrustful. They were super overprotective.

We also didn't really affiliate with the Mizrahi Jewish community, so I feel like the bit that's missing is actually, the Middle Eastern part, that's the piece of me that didn't get privileged. It's not a very common experience—growing up in Chicago, in the Midwest most Jewish people who are off the boat come from Eastern Europe or Germany. They don't come from Baghdad, Egypt, Lebanon, or India.



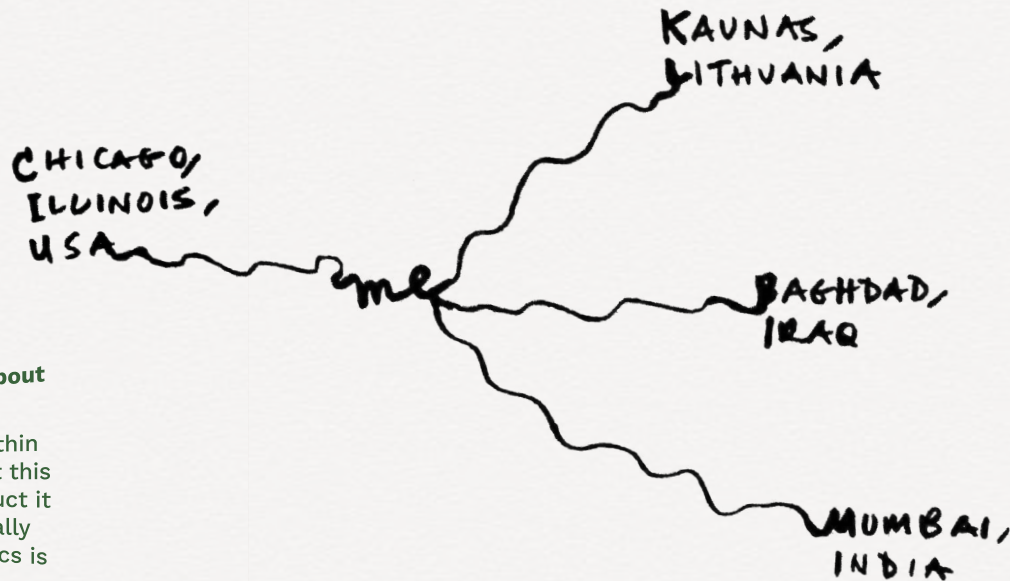
You mentioned your mom cooking two different cuisines growing up, what was that experience like? Do you still carry that with you?

I love it. The cultures were expressed through ritual and through food. I grew up in the 60s and 70s and there weren't that many restaurants. You couldn't go eat different kinds of cuisines like we do now. So she cooked the food that she grew up with. She cooked the food that my father liked, and my father cooked the food he grew up with. My mother would also experiment a lot. She would make the equivalent of kosher American Chinese food—some fried rice and little beef spare ribs and she'd be totally happy. So, it was really weird food wise, but good, and I really still like cooking.

Have you ever talked about how you feel about your cultural identity with anybody else?

The cousin that I'm closest to was born within the same year as me. We always talk about this stuff. We are constantly trying to deconstruct it and understand it. Lately I've started to really think more about it, because identity politics is so much more present.

It's only recently that I'm starting to more outwardly identify myself as brown-ish. I don't even know what to really call it. Although I've had all the benefits of and the privileges that in this country come with being lighter skinned, I feel like I have to acknowledge my roots and that part of my identity.



imposter syndrome

It's awkward at this age to jump on a bandwagon that's identity based. Or to redefine yourself, because then it seems like "Are you doing this because...". It's a sensitive situation I think for people in their 50s and 60s for whom identity was private and who have gotten privileged on the basis of being lighter skinned. Or maybe that's just how I feel. Embracing it now seems like you're trying to actually capitalize on the cultural cachet, of putting yourself out as a particular identity.

I understand where you're coming from, but I also think that it all depends on the person's intentions at that point. Whether you're trying to capitalize on something that you've never cared for or if you're really trying to learn about and express your culture and just grow as a human.

I like that way of looking at it. I just don't want someone to feel like I'm encroaching on their space. Because I have enjoyed a lot of privilege. But then I think about my Father and he did not enjoy privilege at all; we have very few relatives on his side of the family because most of them were killed in concentration camps. So sometimes you wake up and you just feel fortunate that you were born in this time, in this place, and not somewhere else.

Exactly. I hope that everybody is able to experience every single part of their cultures, without having that constant thought in the back of your head that you might be coming across as taking advantage of a situation. But I can see how that feeling might vary from person to person, and their personal experiences with their identity.

I have a very strong sense of impostor syndrome. Because I don't feel completely American, I don't feel completely Eastern European and I don't feel completely Mizrahi. I have to say it's kind of disappointing that my identity hasn't gelled.



Was there ever a time that you felt like you weren't able to really express yourself as anything other than American?

So, it is only really recently that I'm putting who I feel myself to be out there as part of my identity. It's actually kind of funny. It's happening in the design research class now that I believe who we are has a very strong effect on what we're interested in and how, what and why we design? So we started with an exercise about positionality, and I put mine right out there too. That's when I realized that there are two people in design research right now who have a combined European, Northern African, and Arab background. It's super interesting seeing students who trace their roots to Lithuania like I do too, it's so interesting. It's kind of funny, it's like in my own sense, my 'coming out'.

I think it is amazing to be able to find people that we can relate to, in New Paltz of all places. If I am being honest I did not expect to meet as many bicultural people as I have in the past four years here.

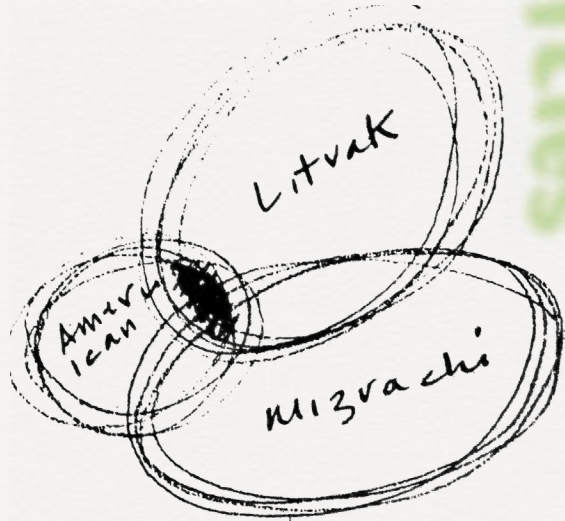
It's wonderful. I mean, I have taught here for 20 years and the school went from being predominantly white to being just this amazing and gorgeous representation of the diversity of the state and the world. I see how it even affects our classes, because now people can look around the room and say hey, there's somebody else with a really similar background— a shock of recognition, and it means the world.

Did you eventually learn your mother tongue or the other languages that overlapped with your cultures?

So because my parents didn't have a language in common other than English and my mom was raised as a British subject, her English was the Queen's English. Whereas my father could speak a lot of different languages, he picked up a lot of stuff in concentration camps. Yiddish was his mother tongue. It's expressed in Hebrew characters, but it's like a medieval Germanic language. He also spoke Russian, Polish, German because it's so close to Yiddish, and then he also picked up English.



I learned Hebrew to pray. I know a smattering of Yiddish, I could translate maybe 35% of a conversation. They usually took place between my father and his siblings, but I can only speak about four or five sentences. I'm still sorting out what I heard growing up when my mother was talking to her sisters, what was Hindi and what was Arabic? So I know all of these bits and pieces, because she couldn't speak to him in her mother tongue and he couldn't speak to her in his.



find your
communities

If you could tell your younger self something in relation to your identity, what would it be?

I would tell my younger self to go out and explore and get to know the communities that I relate to much more to really develop that sense of agency. This was a while ago, my now-husband and I went to a Syrian bakery before one of the Jewish holidays and for me it was a big deal, I think I wanted to be seen, but I wasn't part of the neighborhood. So when we got there, even though we got these great sweets, I was really an outsider. I didn't know anybody there. So, I think I really would have said to my younger self "go out and find your communities, not one, but all of them". Is there a Mizrahi community in Chicago? Where do they shop? Where do they eat? Where do they hang out? Use it as a way of reaching out to people. I think it's very important to have that sense of belonging. That's super important.

It's the people you click with that make it worth it. Even if it's a two minute conversation, you get so much from that. There is just so much joy because there's so much to talk about and explore.

It just makes me realize how much all we want is for someone to see us and accept us as we are, you know. It's good stuff.



**We may have all come on
different ships, but we're
in the same boat now**

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Emma Franznick

Where does your biculturality come from?

I'm adopted from China but I was raised in a white family. I grew up in a white neighborhood and there weren't many Asians there, and all the Asians at my school were pretty much adopted too. So I never really had a chance to experience my Chinese culture and I just grew up around American culture.

It's only after I grew up that it became present to me that I'm different from other people and not who I really thought I was. I became more aware that I had this other side of me that people may not know of. But when they see my mom and that she's white, they say "oh, you're adopted". I knew I didn't look like my family when I was younger, and I was aware that I was adopted.

What does being bicultural mean for you? How have you gone from just realizing that 'you're different from other people' to where you are now?

To me being bicultural means experiencing two cultures at once. I have my Chinese heritage that I was born with and then the American culture that I grew up with here after being adopted. Growing up people would make fun of me, I was bullied, called racial slurs, and so I hated the fact that I was Chinese. I wished I was white.

But as I got into high school I slowly realized, this is who I am, and I can't change that. I decided to actually embrace the fact that I was Chinese. I even wrote essays about it for scholarships and I was able to get a scholarship, because I finally realized who I was.



I'm really sorry that you were bullied and called those awful things. Nobody should ever have to experience that, especially as a child. But I'm glad that you were able to come to this point and fully embrace who you are. Have you ever talked to anybody about how you felt about your identity?

To be honest, not really. Probably only a few people—close friends. But not to an extent where a lot of people know, so maybe like five people. I actually haven't even spoken to my mom about this. She doesn't know that I was bullied or called racist slurs or anything. I feel like if I told her she would overreact because she's my mom and that's what a mom would do.

When you talked about it with your close friends how did they react?

One person I told was my housemate. We actually went to high school together but we never really spoke to each other. We became friends after we realized that we both attend the same college. When I told him about it, he was like "oh, I never knew". One reason for that was because we never talked in school, and another is that he just never realized all of that was going on in school because he's white. He never understood the side of a minority.

Would you say you've ever had a great moment with your bicultural identity or anything special that you remember?

Actually, yes. Freshman year at New Paltz, I lived in Shango Hall, and there was someone a couple doors down who I got to know. I had found out that she's also adopted from China, so I was able to become really good friends with her because we shared this mutual path.

Then Sophomore year they were holding a meeting at the Asian Pacific Islander Student Association, with Asian adoptee as the topic. My friend from Shango and I went to the meeting and met two other Chinese adoptees, and we shared our experiences with each other. I'm still really good friends with all three of them.

Now that you're starting to feel comfortable with your heritage, are there any ways that you outwardly express yourself?

I guess the one thing I can think of is cooking. Usually my friend and I cook a lot of Chinese food because her family runs a Chinese-Peruvian restaurant back in Peru. She knows the recipes and I know how to cook—it's the perfect combination for a great outcome of great food.

a minority

When you finally came to the realization that you are who you are, was there any way that you wanted to learn more about your heritage?

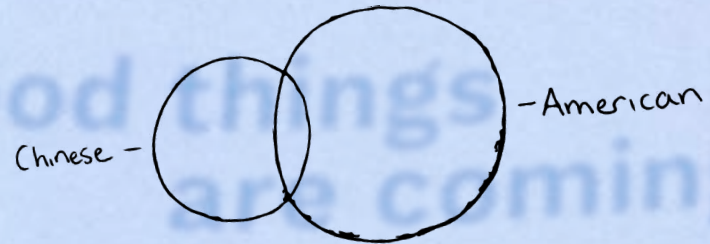
In high school there was a Chinese cultural club that I decided to join. Most of the people that joined were white, and I don't know why. The president wasn't even Chinese, but the vice president was. Anyways, every month we would go to Chinatown and eat food from different restaurants and cuisines. It was great. Then senior year I ended up becoming the President of the club.

I'm assuming that those trips to Chinatown fueled your interest in food?

Yeah. Seeing all those people that looked like me cooking was amazing. All the Chinese people would start talking to me and trying to get me into their store. But, at that point I didn't speak Chinese. I ended up taking Chinese classes freshman year, but I don't really remember much of it. I can take a tiny question here and there, but that's it. I know what you could call 'minimum Chinese'.

If you could tell your younger self something in relation to your journey with your identity, what would it be?

Don't worry about anything. You can't change who you are, so just deal with it. But remember that there are good things to come. I gained so many friends and resources and connections by deciding that I am who I am. I'm grateful that I'm Chinese now, and I no longer feel that it's a burden in my life. I don't wish to be American anymore.



**One of the benefits of
being bicultural is simply the
awareness that how you
live is not the only way.**

—Ann Campanella

If you would like to look at more of my work visit:
nishipatel.myportfolio.com

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